

Reginald Marsh



Selections from the
Felicia Meyer Marsh Bequest

June 13-August 26, 1979

Whitney Museum of American Art, New York

September 7-29, 1979

Moore College of Art, Philadelphia

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945 Madison Avenue, New York, New York 10021

This exhibition and brochure are made
possible by a grant from a private
foundation through the kindness of
Nanette L. Laitman.

Designer: Nathan Garland

Photographer: Geoffrey Clements

Reginald Marsh

It is an honor to publish a tribute to Reginald Marsh by Lloyd Goodrich, author of the definitive work on the artist, published by Harry N. Abrams Inc. in 1972. Goodrich has been associated with the Whitney Museum since its founding and was Director from 1958 to 1968. He continues to serve as a valued Honorary Trustee. His vivid recollections of Marsh and precise descriptions of Marsh's work remind us that he is the most informed scholar in American art history of the twentieth century, a fact celebrated by the American Academy of Arts and Letters with presentation of its Award for Distinguished Service to the Arts on May 23, 1979.

Tom Armstrong
Director

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A Tribute to Reginald Marsh

by Lloyd Goodrich

Reginald Marsh's dominant subject matter was New York City in its myriad aspects: streets and their crowds, the subway and the elevated, burlesque shows, night clubs, the Bowery and its bums, Coney Island beach with its swarming thousands, the mad world of Luna Park, the harbor and its busy life, the great bridges, the skyline of Manhattan. The city was his passion, and he knew it as few artists have. Wherever city life was liveliest and the crowds were thickest, he found his subjects. His social range was wide, from dime-a-dance joints to the Stork Club; but his greatest interest was in the vast majority and their activities and work and pursuit of pleasure.

His realism was uncompromising; he saw city life without false glamor. Compared to his predecessors of what has been called the Ashcan School his viewpoint was more drastic, recognizing the ugliness of much of the urban scene, the scarcity of ideal beauty in most of the city's inhabitants, the degradation and human misery of the Bowery's derelicts. His work was never devoid of humor, but it was a mordant humor, a relish for the grotesque. He had an inborn, natural gift for character; his crowds were not faceless robots but individuals, keenly characterized. Ugly or goodlooking, his people were alive. The human body was the central motif of his art, as it has been for artists through the ages. Sex as publicly displayed in burlesque houses, dance halls and on Coney Island beach fascinated him: the magnetic power of the female body, that perennial theme that has inspired some of the world's greatest art—and some of the worst.

While he concentrated on the city's

people, he also gave a major role to their inanimate setting: the jungle of buildings, shop windows, advertising signs, billboards, traffic signals, lampposts, etc., in which city dwellers exist. In this his viewpoint contrasted with that of Edward Hopper, who portrayed the city's massive architectural forms, simplified to bare essentials, and often without human actors. Marsh, on the contrary, delighted in the wild profusion of the urban landscape. And in his scenes of the skyline, the bridges and the harbor he captured the unplanned majesty of the metropolis.

Marsh's art was an unusual combination of firsthand realism and conscious design. It was based not only on acute observation of contemporary actualities but on mastery of the human figure, an innate sense of plastic form and movement, and intensive study of the old masters. As he himself said: "Art is derived from two sources: art and nature. All art is a mixture of the two." He began his career as a draftsman and an illustrator; but as he matured he became increasingly aware of the art of the old masters, and his mature work combined his inborn gift for realistic representation with three-dimensional design.

Marsh was born into art. His father, Fred Dana Marsh, was a talented painter and a pioneer in picturing the building of New York's early skyscrapers. Reginald's mother was a miniature-painter. They were in Paris in 1898 when the boy was born in an apartment over the Café du Dôme. When he was two the family came back to America and settled in Nutley, New Jersey, a suburb unusual in the number of its artists and writers. It was there that I first knew Reg; our parents

Self-Portrait, c. 1926



were congenial, I was only a few months older than he, and we became close friends, and remained so throughout his life. Our families spent summers in Rhode Island, where Reg and I rowed and swam and took long walking trips. I shared his artistic interests and ambitions, and after high school I went to the Art Students League.

Reg, on the other hand, being brought up in a family of artists, was given no regular art training; but he began to draw before he was three; and for the rest of his life he drew constantly, unceasingly.

By the dominating wishes of his well-to-do grandfather he went through a conventional education at Lawrenceville School and Yale. In college, however, he became the star illustrator for *The Yale Record*, a career which he continued after graduation, on the staff of the New York *Daily News*, drawing vaudeville shows, and then as one of the original staff of the new *New Yorker*. In those years he thought of himself as an illustrator and cartoonist; as he said later, "Painting seemed to me then a laborious way to make a bad drawing." Nevertheless in his early twenties he began studying intermittently at the League, and in 1923—a rather late date—he commenced to paint seriously. (Winslow Homer was an illustrator and not yet a painter until he was twenty-six, and Thomas Eakins did not start painting regularly until he was almost twenty-three.)

Reg's growing interest in fine art was fostered by his marriage in 1923 to the sculptor Betty Burroughs, who like him was the child of two artists: Bryson Burroughs, painter and curator of paintings at the Metropolitan Museum, and Edith Woodman Burroughs, sculptor.

His first visit to Europe since infancy, in 1925/6, opened his eyes to the great art of the past. This artistic maturing was strengthened, after his return, by growing friendship with his teacher at the League, Kenneth Hayes Miller, one of the most penetrating and illuminating minds in American art. "I still show him every picture I make," Reg wrote in 1944.

In the 1920s the liveliest center for young and liberal artists was the Whitney Studio Club, founded in 1918 by Gertrude Vanderbilt Whitney, with Juliana Force as director. Reg joined the Club, which included him in its annual members' exhibitions, and in the fall of 1924 gave him his first one-man show, of oils and watercolors; and the Club's successor, the Whitney Studio Galleries, gave him another show of lithographs in 1928. It was through the Club and the Galleries that Mrs. Whitney during the 1920s bought two oils (a self-portrait and one of Alexander Brook), four watercolors, five etchings, and a lithograph; all of which were to become part of the Permanent Collection of the Whitney Museum of American Art.

After the Whitney Museum was established in 1930 but before it opened in 1931, Mrs. Force and I went to Reg's studio on 14th Street with the intent to buy a more substantial painting. On his easel was his recently finished and now well-known *Why Not Use the "L"?* Without hesitation Mrs. Force said, "Send it to the museum." No price had been mentioned. Reg telephoned me and asked, "What should I charge?" I had to say, "Look, Reg, I can't tell you that." "Would fifteen hundred be all right?" he asked, and I told him to go ahead.

After the museum opened, he (like

Crowd on a Street at Coney Island, c. 1928



Hopper and some others) was included in practically all our annual and biennial exhibitions, not only of paintings but of watercolors, drawings and prints. In 1937 the museum purchased his tempera *Twenty Cent Movie*; in 1940, his watercolor *Liner*; in 1943 his large ink and watercolor drawing *Coney Island Beach, Number 1*; in 1945 a small watercolor *Girl Walking*; and through the years, five more prints. In 1953 he generously exchanged three early watercolors that had been brought during the Club years for two major works, the large watercolor *New Dodgem* and the big Chinese ink drawing, *White Tower Hamburger*.

Of all the artists with whom I have been fortunate to be friends, Reg was the most prodigious worker and the most active experimenter in technical methods. He practiced every kind of medium: pen, pencil, crayon, oil, egg tempera, watercolor, fresco, Chinese ink, lithography, etching and engraving. Beginning as a black-and-white draftsman, he went on to watercolor, which came naturally to him and which he used all his life; then oil, which brought problems; then egg tempera, a watercolor-like medium in which he did many of his major paintings; then large-scale watercolors, as complex as his temperas; then the Maroger medium, an unfortunate detour; then big Chinese ink compositions, of which he drew several hundred. Throughout his career he was a prolific printmaker, in lithography, etching, and finally the ancient technique of engraving. In the 1930s he was one of the first mural painters commissioned by the Federal art projects; his greatest accomplishment was the extensive series of frescoes in the rotunda of the Customs

House in downtown Manhattan, picturing eight successive stages in the arrival of a steamship in New York—one of the major American mural achievements. Never without a sketchbook, he accumulated several hundred ringbooks of drawings of people and things seen. He took hundreds of photographs of New York and Coney Island—rich records of an artist's eye for the city's many aspects.

Besides this prolific production, Reg was a busy teacher, at the Art Students League from 1935 on, and at the Moore Institute in Philadelphia from 1949. Beginning in 1925 he made seven long visits to Europe, chiefly to look at art: he once said, "I have made some kind of copy in pen and ink of almost every great picture in the European cities I visited." Into the fifty-five years of his life he packed the activities of several ordinary lifetimes. His untimely death in 1954, from a heart attack, was a shock and a lasting sorrow to his many friends, and a major loss to American art.

I had always assumed that some day I would organize a Marsh retrospective exhibition for the Whitney Museum. His death changed it into a memorial exhibition at the museum in 1955, which traveled to seven other museums throughout the country. In the settlement of his estate an important part was played by the late William Benton, who had been a fellow student at Yale and had gone on to become an advertising magnate, publisher of the American editions of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, and senator from Connecticut. He had bought many pictures from Reg, and after his death acquired many more. In 1955 Senator Benton and Mrs. Marsh gave the Whitney the fine tempera *Human Pool Tables*, and



later he, with her agreement, gave the museum all the surviving original plates of Reg's etchings and engravings, from which the museum has already had thirty posthumous restrikes printed.

Reg's second wife was the painter Felicia Meyer, whom he married in 1934, when she was twenty-one. Like him she was the child of two painters, Herbert Meyer and Anne Norton Meyer, of Dorset, Vermont. She was best known for her landscapes of the Vermont country which she loved and where she spent her summers. Like her husband's pictures, they were *drawn*, with precision and with command of the exact character of natural forms; but always with a keen awareness of the season, the weather, the time of day, and above all, the light. Light played a leading role, playing over the whole scene, so that every inch of her paintings was alive. Her landscapes, with their sense of nature's life, their freshness and delicacy, and their unostentatious skill, were pervaded with a lyrical poetry of a very personal kind. The same qualities appeared in her cityscapes, fewer in number but among her most individual works. In most respects Felicia's art was the direct opposite of Reg's, but they understood each other completely and valued each other's gifts. She was one of his favorite models, and her face and figure appear frequently in his pictures. Like him, she paid no attention to changing fashions in art, but continued to express her personal vision of nature until her too-early death last year.

In the twenty-three years following Reg's death, Felicia devoted herself to preserving his works and his memory. In this she had the help of his former student Norman Sasowsky, now on the faculty of

the University of Delaware, who has for some years, with the Whitney's cooperation, been compiling a record of Reg's work in all mediums, and who in 1976 published a thorough scholarly catalogue of his prints.

Felicia Marsh's will, written with Norman Sasowsky's cooperation, bequeathed individual works by her husband to eighty-six museums throughout the country—an unprecedented, generous and intelligent distribution which assures that his pictures will be available to the widest possible public. To the Whitney Museum she bequeathed more than 130 oils, temperas, and watercolors, 450 drawings and sketches, a number of sketchbooks, and a set of his photographs, as well as a collection of works by the Marshes' contemporaries and friends that had been kept in her New York apartment—the third largest bequest to the museum, the others being Mrs. Whitney's original gift in 1930, and the Edward Hopper bequest in 1970. Through this extraordinarily generous gift the Whitney Museum becomes a major center for the study and enjoyment of Reginald Marsh's art.

Coney Island Beach—Ballet—Girl Pirouetting, 1952



Selections from the Bequest of Felicia Meyer Marsh

Works by Reginald Marsh

Self-Portrait, c. 1926

Oil on panel, $18\frac{1}{4} \times 14\frac{7}{8}$ inches

Death Avenue, 1927

Oil on canvas, 30×40 inches

LUNCH, 1927

Oil on canvas, 24×36 inches

Untitled (Skyline of New York), c. 1927

Oil on canvas, 24×36 inches

Crowd on a Street at Coney Island,

c. 1928. Oil on canvas, 24×36 inches

Locomotive Watering, c. 1928

Oil on canvas, 30×40 inches

Men Drilling, c. 1928

Oil on canvas, 20×30 inches

People Seated and Standing in Subway,

c. 1928. Oil on canvas, 30×40 inches

Subway, c. 1928

Oil on canvas, 36×48 inches

Ten Cents a Dance, 1933

Tempera on panel, 36×48 inches

Coney Island Beach, n.d.

Chinese ink on paper, 22×30 inches

Beach Scene, 1952

Chinese ink on paper, $22\frac{1}{4} \times 30\frac{1}{2}$ inches
(sight)

Coney Island Beach—Ballet—Girl

Pirouetting, 1952 Chinese ink on paper,
 $21\frac{1}{2} \times 29\frac{1}{2}$ inches

Matinee, 1952

Oil on panel, $48 \times 11\frac{1}{2}$ inches

The Bowery—Strokey's Bar, 1953

Tempera on panel, 30×24 inches

No Turns Permitted, 1954

Tempera on panel, $47\frac{3}{4} \times 12$ inches

*Plus a selection of drawings and
photographs*

Works by Other Artists

Peggy Bacon (b. 1895)

Portrait of Reginald Marsh, 1932

Pastel on canvas, 22×18 inches

John Koch (1909–1978)

Portrait of Felicia and Reginald Marsh,
n.d.

Oil on canvas, 30×25 inches



Reginald Marsh

Reginald Marsh was born on March 14, 1898, in Paris. His family returned to the United States in 1900 and settled in Nutley, New Jersey, until 1914, when they moved to New Rochelle, New York. Graduating from Yale University in 1920, he moved to New York City and began work as an illustrator for the New York *Daily News* and later *The New Yorker*, as well as a free-lance illustrator for the *Evening Post*, *Harper's Bazaar*, *Vanity Fair*, *Life*, *Fortune*, and many books. In 1922 he studied for short periods at the Art Students League under Kenneth Hayes Miller, George Bridgman and George Luks. His reputation as a serious artist began in the early 1920s. In 1923 he joined the Whitney Studio Club, which gave him his first one-man exhibition, in 1924. His work was also shown in one-man exhibitions in New York at the Valentine Dudensing Galleries, the Weyhe Gallery, the Marie Sterner Gallery, and the Whitney Studio Galleries. From 1930 on he had exhibitions about every two years at the Frank K.M. Rehn Gallery. His interest in human anatomy motivated him to do work in dissection in the early 1930s

at the College of Physicians and Surgeons and the Cornell University Medical College, and it is manifested in his book *Anatomy for Artists*, published in 1945. In 1935 he became a teacher at the Art Students League, and in 1949 he was appointed head of the Department of Painting at the Moore Institute of Art, Science and Industry, Philadelphia; he kept both posts for the rest of his life. As part of the Treasury Department art program he painted two frescoes in the Post Office Building, Washington, D.C., in 1935; and in 1937 a series of large murals in the rotunda of the United States Custom House, New York. He was married twice, to the sculptor Betty Burroughs from 1923 until their divorce in 1933; and from 1934 until his death, to the painter Felicia Meyer. From the early 1930s on he was included in most major national exhibitions of contemporary American art. He received many awards and honors, and was held in the utmost respect by his professional colleagues. His works are in most important collections of twentieth-century American art. He died on July 3, 1954, in Dorset, Vermont.

Patterson Sims
Associate Curator
Permanent Collection



